

In Brazil, Talk Is Cheap and Cigarettes Too

Contributed by Cristiane Ribeiro
Tuesday, 31 May 2005

World leader in anti-smoking campaigns, Brazil has not managed to prevent more and more adolescents from acquiring the habit.

Members of the poorest segments of the population are also attracted by cigarettes, which are cheap and can be purchased from any sidewalk vendor.

Miss X, who is 15 and lives in a middle-class neighborhood in Rio de Janeiro, says she started smoking when she was 12 and is aware of the health risks, but still continues to smoke together with her friends from school.

"I began smoking at parties with friends. We pitch in and buy a pack, and each one smokes two cigarettes. We prefer good-tasting cigarettes, but when we really want to smoke, any one will do," the adolescent remarked.

There are over 35 million smokers countrywide, and, according to data from the National Cancer Institute (Inca), 200 thousand Brazilians die each year as a result of smoking-related diseases.

The head of the Inca's Smoking Control Division, Tânia Cavalcante, recalls that the number of smokers in the country has declined considerably in recent years, but she cautions that Brazilian cigarettes are still very cheap (the sixth least expensive in the world), making it easier for children and adolescents to have access and acquire the habit.

"The government raised taxes on cigarettes, but the price of the product must go up to prevent young people from having access. Another important step is to intensify control over the black market in cigarettes through a joint effort with the Mercosur countries, which is where the biggest volume of illegal cigarette sales occurs," Cavalcante added.

According to the physician, higher taxes and cigarette prices, as well as the war on contraband, are part of the World Health Organization's (WHO) Framework Convention to Combat Tobacco, the first international public health treaty, which went into effect in February.

There are already 62 signatory countries, but Brazil, despite its leadership in anti-smoking campaigns, has still not signed the document.

The text has been approved by the Chamber of Deputies, but it is stalled in the Senate, in consequence of the arguments adduced by tobacco growers that the initiative will cause economic damage, in addition to large-scale unemployment.

"Brazil is the world's second largest tobacco producer (the largest is China), but we know that 85% of the national crop is exported. Therefore, ratifying the Framework Convention will not produce an abrupt impact on the economy, besides which we will have guaranteed access to financial and technical mechanisms to underpin economically viable alternatives to tobacco-growing.

"We are fighting against the clock. We must ratify the Convention by October in order to participate in the first meeting of the signatory countries, which is scheduled for February, 2006, and will define the rules for the operation of the Treaty," Cavalcante pointed out.

This year's theme for World Tobacco-Free Day, which is commemorated today, May 31, is "Health Professionals and Tobacco Control."

In Rio, the National Cancer Institute erected a symbolic cemetery with 50 crosses on Copacabana beach.

Movie theaters, before the feature films go on, are showing 30-second information pieces warning of the harm that cigarettes can cause, and theatrical presentations are being made at universities, also alerting to the diseases caused by smoking.

Agência Brasil